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Reading Article G2

Article #7: Summits in Sight

by Stephen Madden

One of the country's finest rock climbers is many things: courageous, strong, driven, dutiful—and blind.

By the time Erik Weihenmayer was 12 years old, the eyesight that had been deserting him was nearly gone. This didn't slow Erik. "I'd built a plywood ramp in our driveway to jump my bike over," he remembers. "I'd fly ten feet through the air and bounce when I landed. It was great."

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For Ed, a former football captain at Princeton and an extremely vital man, it wasn't easy seeing his son scrape his shins on life's obstacles. Once, Ed watched as Erik ran that bike smack into a parked car. The boy got up, dusted himself off and pedaled home. Ed never mentioned the incident.

Only by observing could Ed figure out ways to help. He encouraged Erik to try out for his Connecticut high school's wrestling team, and Erik became a champion. After retinoschisis had completely claimed Erik's sight, Ed enrolled the boy in the outdoors program at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Massachusetts, and soon Erik was climbing New Hampshire's rock faces.

He had found a calling. Erik became an intrepid adventurer and a superb rock climber. He hiked all over the world, often with his father in attendance. On June 27, 1995—Helen Keller's birthday¹—Erik conquered Alaska's 20,320-foot Mount McKinley. As he ascended,

his dad circled the peak in a plane to share the experience. In 1996, Ed hiked to the top of Yosemite's El Capitan to greet Erik, who had spent four days climbing the sheer rock face. Ed wasn't with Erik for his marriage proposal to Ellen Reeve atop Arizona's 2,700-foot Camelback Mountain last year, but was Erik Weihenmayer, climbing partner Chris Morris, and Erik's father Ed Weihenmayer there as Erik and Ellen wed, 13,000 feet up Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro..Last winter, Erik joined Ed, a former Marine aviator who flew more than 100 missions over Vietnam, on a 1,200-mile cycle trek through that country. At one point, Erik, riding behind Ed on a tandem bike, teased, "You know, Dad, I ride and hike with you, but you never come rock climbing with me. I think you owe me."

"Tell me where and when," Ed replied.

And so it is that on this azure morning Ed and Erik Weihenmayer stand at the base of a 200-foot rock face named Wind Ridge, in Colorado's Eldorado Canyon State Park. Today, the son will lead the father. Rock climbing is not for the unfit. Erik has the taut, flat

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over sighted climbers, owing to an acute sense of touch many blind people develop—and rock climbing is all about touch. Soon, Erik is standing on a ledge 30 feet up.

Now, Ed's turn. He reaches for a handhold, pulls himself up, searches for a foothold. His breathing is labored. Despite the cool mountain air, sweat pours off him. He's 10 feet up the rock when he falls, his helmet making a dull thud as it hits the cliff. Ed swings like a pendulum on the end of his rope. Forget nervous, he looks scared. Erik's voice floats down: "C'mon, Dad. It's easier up here." Ed wipes sweat from his eyes and yells, "Climbing!" Ed moves to his left and falls again. He moves right and falls a third time. Still he climbs, and you start to understand how Erik learned to face the world with so much courage. You wonder if courage is more important in life than sight.

Ed has very little mobility in his left knee because of a football injury, so rather than move his leg to a foothold, he reaches across his body with his right hand, grabs the foot and

jams it in. So it goes, until he is standing on the ledge. Ed, his face a mask of pure exhaustion, says, "I don't know, Erik. Maybe I should call it quits." Erik hands his dad a water bottle. They talk gently to each other, Erik telling Ed what's above, pretending he didn't hear his father. Soon they're climbing again, and Ed doesn't fall anymore today.

Later, at the car, Ed looks back at Wind Ridge, bathed in the warm light of a Rocky Mountain afternoon. It's a beautiful sight, he says. Erik agrees. "Most people get beauty from their vision," Erik says. "The blind get it from other senses. Rock feels beautiful to me—the texture, the temperatures, the way cracks branch out and come back."

Ed smiles. The lessons never end. He takes Erik's hand and shakes it. "Thanks, buddy," he says. "I wouldn't have had the courage to do it if you hadn't been there. I didn't want to let you down."

"I know, Dad."

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